Sylvia Rivera

Sylvia Ray Rivera (July 2, 1951 – February 19, 2002)[4] was a Latina American gay liberation[5] and transgender rights activist[6] significant in the LGBT history of New York City and of the United States as a whole. Rivera, who identified as a drag queen,[1][7][8] was a founding member of both the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance.

With her close friend Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a group dedicated to helping homeless young drag queens, gay kids, and trans women.[9]

Sylvia Ray Rivera

Rivera, in the "gay camp" at the Christopher Street Piers c. 2000

Born	Ray Rivera[1] July 2, 1951 New York City, United States
Died	February 19, 2002 (aged 50) New York City, United States
Nationality	American
Occupation	Activist
Known for	Gay liberation,[2] transgender activist, advocate for the homeless.[3]

Contents

Early life
Activism
Death
Tributes
Gender
See also
References
External links

Early life

Rivera was born and raised in New York City and lived most of her life in or near the city; she was of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan descent.[1] She was abandoned by her birth father José Rivera early in life and became an orphan after her mother committed suicide when Rivera was three years old.[10] Rivera was then raised by her Venezuelan grandmother, who disapproved of Rivera's effeminate behavior, particularly after Rivera began to wear makeup in fourth grade.[10] As a result, Rivera began living on the streets at the age of 11 and worked as a child prostitute. She was taken in by the local community of drag queens, who gave her the name Sylvia.[11]

Activism

Rivera's activism began during the Civil Rights Movement and continued through the movement against the Vietnam war and second-wave feminist movements. Rivera said she was a regular patron of the Stonewall Inn and was present during the Stonewall Riots in 1969, when gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, drag queens, street people and trans people rose up against what started as a routine raid by the police.[12] Stonewall historian David Carter has questioned whether Rivera was at the first night of the Stonewall Riots, based on contradictory statements she made as well as testimony relayed to him by early gay rights activists, including Marsha P. Johnson, who denied Rivera was present at the riots.[13] Rivera also became involved in Puerto Rican and African American youth activism, particularly with the Young Lords and Black Panthers.[10]

At different times in her life, Rivera battled substance abuse and lived on the streets, largely in the gay homeless community at the Christopher Street docks.[3] Her experiences made her more focused on advocacy for those who, in her view, mainstream society and the assimilationist sectors of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities were leaving behind.[14] For these reasons Rivera projected her voice to give her community power. She fought for herself but most importantly for the rights of people of color and low-income queers and trans people. As someone who suffered from systematic poverty and racism, Rivera used her voice for unity, sharing her stories, pain, and struggles to show her community they are not alone. She amplified the voices of the most vulnerable members of the gay community: drag queens, homeless youth, gay inmates in prison and jail, and transgender people.[15]

Johnson was Rivera's friend and ally. Their discussions led to activism and in 1970, Rivera and Johnson co-founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). STAR offered services and advocacy for homeless queer youth,[16] and fought for the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act in New York. SONDA prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, credit, and the exercise of civil rights.[11]

At the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in New York City, Rivera, representing STAR, gave a brief speech from the main stage in which she called out the heterosexual males who were preying on vulnerable members of the community. Rivera espoused what could be seen as a third gender perspective, saying that LGBT prisoners seeking help "do not write women. They do not write men. They write to STAR."[17] At the same event, Rivera and fellow queen Lee Brewster jumped onstage during feminist activist Jean O'Leary's speech and shouts at the crowd her “Y’all Better Quiet Down," speech, stating, "You go to bars because of what drag queens did for you, and *these bitches* tell us to quit being ourselves!"[14][18]

In early July 1992, shortly after the New York City Pride March, Johnson's body was found floating in the Hudson River off the West Village Piers. Police promptly ruled Johnson's death a suicide, despite the presence of a head wound.[19] Johnson's friends and supporters, Rivera included, insisted Johnson had not been suicidal, and a people's postering campaign later declared that Johnson had earlier been harassed near the spot where her body was found. In May 1995, Rivera tried to commit suicide by walking into the Hudson River.[20] That year she also appeared in the Arthur Dong documentary episode "Out Rage '69", part of the PBS series *The Question of Equality*,[21] and gave an extensive interview to gay journalist Randy Wicker in which she discussed her suicide attempts, Johnson's life and death, and her advocacy for poor and working-class gays made homeless by the AIDS crisis.[3]

In the last five years of her life, Rivera renewed her political activity, giving many speeches about the Stonewall Uprising[22] and the necessity for transgender people, including drag queens and butch dykes, to fight for their legacy at the forefront of the LGBT movement. She traveled to Italy for the Millennium March in 2000, where she was acclaimed as the "mother of all gay people".[12] In early 2001, after a service at the Metropolitan Community Church of New York referring to the Star of Bethlehem announcing the birth of Jesus, she decided to resurrect STAR as an active political organization (now changing "Transvestite" to the more recently coined term "Transgender," which at that time was understood to include all gender-nonconforming people).[23] STAR fought for the New York City Transgender Rights Bill and for a trans-inclusive New York State Sexual Orientation Non Discrimination Act. STAR also sponsored street pressures for justice for Amanda Milan, a transgender woman murdered in 2000.[12] Rivera attacked Human Rights Campaign and Empire State Pride Agenda as organizations that were standing in the way of transgender rights. On her deathbed she met with Matt Foreman and Joe Grabarz of ESPA to negotiate transgender inclusion in its political structure and agenda.

Rivera was angered by her perception that the significance of drag queens and drag culture was being minimized by the ostensibly assimilationist gay rights agenda, particularly by new would-be "gay leaders" who were focusing on military service (Don't Ask Don't Tell) and marriage equality.[12][24] Rivera's conflicts with these newer LGBT groups were emblematic of the mainstream LGBT movement's strained relationship to the radical politics of many earlier gay liberation activists. After Rivera's death, Michael Bronski recalled her anger when she felt that she was being marginalized within the community:

> After Gay Liberation Front folded and the more reformist Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) became New York's primary gay rights group, Sylvia Rivera worked hard within their ranks in 1971 to promote a citywide gay rights, anti-discrimination ordinance. But for all of her work, when it came time to make deals, GAA dropped the portions in the civil rights bill that dealt with transvestitism and drag — it just wasn't possible to pass it with such "extreme"

> elements included. As it turned out, it wasn't possible to pass the bill anyway until 1986. But not only was the language of the bill changed, GAA — which was becoming increasingly more conservative, several of its founders and officers had plans to run for public office — even changed its political agenda to exclude issues of transvestitism and drag. It was also not unusual for Sylvia to be urged to "front" possibly dangerous demonstrations, but when the press showed up, she would be pushed aside by the more middle-class, "straight-appearing" leadership. In 1995, Rivera was still hurt: "When things started getting more mainstream, it was like, 'We don't need you no more'". But, she added, "Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned".[25]

According to Bronski, Rivera was banned from New York's Gay & Lesbian Community Center for several years in the mid-1990s, because, on a cold winter's night, she aggressively demanded that the Center take care of poor and homeless queer youth. A short time before her death, Bronski reports that she said:

> One of our main goals now is to destroy the Human Rights Campaign, because I'm tired of sitting on the back of the bumper. It's not even the back of the bus anymore— it's the back of the bumper. The bitch on wheels is back.[25]

Rivera's struggles did not relate exclusively to gay and trans people, as they intersected with issues of poverty and discrimination faced by people of color, which caused friction in the GAA as it was mainly made up of white middle-class gays[26]. The transgender person-of-color activist and scholar Jessi Gan discusses how mainstream LGBT groups have routinely dismissed or not paid sufficient attention to Rivera's Latina identity, while Puerto Rican and Latino groups have often not fully acknowledged Rivera's contribution to their struggles for civil rights.[10] Tim Retzloff has discussed this issue with respect to the omission of discussions about race and ethnicity in mainstream U.S. LGBT history, particularly with regard to Rivera's legacy.[27]

Death

Rivera died during the dawn hours of February 19, 2002 at St. Vincent's Hospital, of complications from liver cancer.[2] Activist Riki Wilchins noted, "In many ways, Sylvia was the Rosa Parks of the modern transgender movement, a term that was not even coined until two decades after Stonewall".[28]

Tributes

"We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are. We have to show the world that we are numerous. There are many of us out there.[29]

Street sign in New York City's Greenwich Village, named in Rivera's honor

As an active member of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, Rivera ministered through the Church's food pantry, which provides food to hungry people. Recalling her life as a child on the streets, she remained a passionate advocate for queer youth, and MCC New York's queer youth shelter is called Sylvia's Place in her honour.[30]

Named in her honor (and established in 2002), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project is dedicated "to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence".[31]

In 2002, actor/comedian Jade Esteban Estrada portrays Rivera in the well-received solo musical *ICONS: The Lesbian and Gay History of the World, Vol. 1*(directed by Aliza Washabaugh-Durand and produced by Aliza Washabaugh-Durand and Christopher Durand) winning Rivera renewed national attention.

In 2005, the corner of Christopher and Hudson streets was renamed "Sylvia Rivera Way" in her honour. This intersection is in Greenwich Village, the neighborhood in New York City where Rivera started organizing, and is only two blocks from the Stonewall Inn.[32]

In January 2007, a new musical based upon Rivera's life, *Sylvia So Far*, premiered in New York at La Mama in a production starring Bianca Leigh as Rivera and Peter Proctor as Marsha P. Johnson. The composer and lyricist is Timothy Mathis (*Wallflowers, Our Story Too, The Conjuring*), a friend of Rivera's in real life. The show moved off-Broadway in the winter of 2007/2008.

The Spring 2007 issue of *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, which was dedicated to "Puerto Rican Queer Sexualities" and published at Hunter College, included a special dossier on Sylvia Rivera, including a transcription of a talk by Rivera from 2001 as well as two academic essays exploring the intersections of Rivera's trans and Latina identities.[10][12][27] The articles in this journal issue complement other essays by Puerto Rican scholars who have also emphasized Rivera's pioneering role.[33][34]

In 2014, The Social Justice Hub at The New School's newly opened University Center was named the Baldwin Rivera Boggs Center after activists James Baldwin, Sylvia Rivera, and Grace Lee Boggs.

In 2015 a portrait of Sylvia Rivera was added to the National Portrait Gallery.[35]

In 2016 Sylvia Rivera was inducted into the Legacy Walk.[36]

Happy Birthday, Marsha! is a short film about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, set in the hours before the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City.

Gender

Rivera's gender identity was complex and varied throughout her life.[1][3] In 1971 she spoke of herself as a "half sister"[37] In her essay "Transvestites: Your Half Sisters and Half Brothers of the Revolution" she specifically claims her use of the word "transvestite" as only applying to the gay community: "Transvestites are homosexual men and women who dress in clothes of the opposite sex."[37]

In interviews and writings in her later years, notably her 1995 interview with Randy Wicker and her 2002 essay, "Queens In Exile, The Forgotten Ones," she expressed a fluid take on gender, referring to herself alternately as a gay man,[5] a gay girl,[3] a drag queen/street queen,[1][7][8] and again as a gay man,[1] embodying all of these experiences and seeing none of these identities as excluding the others.[1] She writes of having considered gender reassignment surgery earlier in life, but of ultimately choosing to reject it, only taking hormones near the end of her life.[1]

> I left home at age 10 in 1961. I hustled on 42nd Street. The early 60s was not a good time for drag queens, effeminate boys or boys that wore makeup like we did. Back then we were beat up by the police, by everybody. I didn't really come out as a drag queen until the late 60s. when drag queens were arrested, what degradation there was. I remember the first time I got arrested, I wasn't even in full drag. I was walking down the street and the cops just snatched me.[38]

> People now want to call me a lesbian because I'm with Julia, and I say, "No. I'm just me. I'm not a lesbian." I'm tired of being labeled. I don't even like the label *transgender.* I'm tired of living with labels. I just want to be who I am. I am Sylvia Rivera. Ray Rivera left home at the age of 10 to become Sylvia. And that's who I am.[1]

See also

- List of Puerto Ricans
- Stormé DeLarverie

References

1. Rivera, Sylvia, "Queens In Exile, The Forgotten Ones" in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* Untorelli Press, 2013.
2. Dunlap, David W. (February 20, 2002). Sylvia Rivera, 50, Figure in Birth of the Gay Liberation Movement. *New York Times*
3. *Randy Wicker Interviews Sylvia Rivera on the Pier* (https://vimeo.com/35975275) Event occurs at Repeatedly throughout interview September 21, 1995. Accessed July 24, 2015.
4. Dunlap, David W. (February 20, 2002). "Sylvia Rivera, 50, Figure in Birth of the Gay Liberation Movement" (https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/20/nyregion/sylvia-rivera-50-figure-in-birth-of-the-gay-liberation-movement.html) *The New York Times*. ISSN 0362-4331 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0362-4331) Retrieved June 1, 2018.
5. *Randy Wicker Interviews Sylvia Rivera on the Pier* (https://vimeo.com/35975275) Event occurs at 14:17. September 21, 1995. Accessed July 24, 2015.
6. "21 Transgender People Who Influenced American Culture" (http://time.com/130734/transgender-celebrities-actors-athletes-in-america/). Time Magazine.
7. Leslie Feinberg (September 24, 2006). Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. (http://www.workers.org/2006/us/lavender-red-73/) *Workers World Party*. "Stonewall combatants Sylvia Rivera and Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson... Both were self-identified drag queens."
8. *Sylvia Rivera Reflects on the Spirit of Marsha P Johnson* (https://vimeo.com/37548074) Event occurs at 1:27. September 21, 1995. Accessed July 24, 2015.
9. Marsha P. Johnson died in 1992. In 2001, Rivera "resurrected" the group, renaming it "Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries." SoundPortraits (July 4, 2001) Update on Remembering Stonewall. (http://soundportraits.org/on-air/remembering_stonewall/update.php) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20130702203403/http://soundportraits.org/on-air/remembering_stonewall/update.php) July 2, 2013, at the Wayback Machine
10. Gan, Jessi. "'Still at the Back of the Bus': Sylvia Rivera's Struggle" (http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/37719107.pdf) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20120406175345/http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/3771910 7.pdf) April 6, 2012, at the Wayback Machine *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 19.1 (Spring 2007): 124–139.
11. Cohen, Stephan (2007). *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: 'An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail'* London: Routledge. ISBN 0-8070-7941-3.
12. Rivera, Sylvia. "Sylvia Rivera's Talk at LGMNY, June 2001, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City". (http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/37719106.pdf) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20120406175409/http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/37719106.pdf) April 6, 2012, at the Wayback Machine *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 19.1 (Spring 2007): 116–123.
13. Paul D. Cain. "David Carter: Historian of The Stonewall Riots" (http://gaytoday.com/interview/070104in.asp). Gay Today.
14. Clendinen, Dudley, and Nagourney, Adam (1999). *Out for Good*, Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0-684-81091-3, pp. 171–172.
15. Shepard, Benjamin (2012). "From Community Organization to Direct Services: The Street Trans Action Revolutionaries to Sylvia Rivera Law Project" *Journal of Social Service Research*
16. Ng, Samuel (2013). "Trans Power! Sylvia Lee Rivera's STAR and the Black Panther Party". *Left History*. **17**.
17. *y'all better quiet down!* (https://web.archive.org/web/20150525022745/https://vimeo.com/45479858) Event occurs at 1:40. Archived from the original (https://vimeo.com/45479858) on May 25, 2015.
18. Duberman, Martin (1993). *Stonewall*, Penguin Books. ISBN 0-525-93602-5, p. 236.
19. Wicker, Randolfe (1992) *"Marsha P Johnson – People's Memorial."* Accessed July 26, 2015.
20. Staff report (May 24, 1995). About New York; Still Here: Sylvia, Who Survived Stonewall, Time and the River. *New York Times*
21. Goodman, Walter (November 4, 1995). Television Review: The Gay Search for Equality. (https://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F07E0DF1739F937A35752C1A963958260&sec=&pagewanted=1) *New York Times*

22. "It was a rebellion, it was an uprising, it was a civil rights disobedience — it wasn't no damn riot." – Stormé DeLarverie in K, Kristi (May 28, 2014). "Something Like A Super Lesbian: Stormé DeLarverie (In Memoriam)" (http://thekword.com/2014/05/28/something-like-a-super-lesbian-storme-delarverie-in-memoriam/) thekword.com. Retrieved March 22, 2015.
23. Feinberg, Leslie (1996) *Transgender Warriors: Making History*. Boston: Beacon Press. ISBN 0-8070-7941-3
24. Hoffman, Amy (2007) *An Army of Ex-Lovers: My life at the Gay Community News* University of Massachusetts Press 978-1558496217
25. Bronski, Michael (April 2002). Sylvia Rivera: 1951–2002. (http://www.zmag.org/Zmag/articles/april02bronski.htm) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20051113203206/http://www.zmag.org/ZMag/articles/april02bronski.htm) 2005-11-13 at the Wayback Machine in *Z Magazine*. "Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned".
26. "The Crusade of Transgender Activist Sylvia Rivera" (https://www.bese.com/the-crusade-of-transgender-activist-sylvia-rivera/). *BESE*. 2018-06-08. Retrieved 2019-03-04.
27. Retzloff, Tim. "Eliding Trans Latino/a Queer Experience in U.S. LGBT History: José Sarria and Sylvia Rivera Reexamined". (http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/37719108.pdf) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20100828001018/http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/377/37719108.pdf) August 28, 2010, at the Wayback Machine *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 19.1 (Spring 2007): 140–161.
28. Wilchins, Riki (February 27, 2002). "A Woman for Her Time: In Memory of Stonewall Warrior Sylvia Rivera" (https://web.archive.org/web/20060619094746/http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0209,wilchins,32645,1.html) *Village Voice*. Archived from the original (http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0209,wilchins,32645,1.html) on June 19, 2006.
29. "Her Story To Tell" (https://www.ryot.org/blog/stories/her-story-to-tell).
30. Sylvia Rivera's obituary (https://web.archive.org/web/20060619122836/http://www.sylviasplace.org/sylvia_obituary.htm) via MCCNY
31. "SRLP (Sylvia Rivera Law Project)" (https://srlp.org/). *SRLP (Sylvia Rivera Law Project)* Retrieved 2019-03-04.
32. Withers, James (November 25, 2005). Remembering Sylvia Rivera: Though a divisive figure, trans activist and Stonewall rioter gets honored with street sign (http://www.newyorkblade.com/2005/11-25/news/localnews/rivera.cfm) *New York Blade*
33. Aponte-Parés, Luis. "Outside/In: Crossing Queer and Latino Boundaries". In *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, eds. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, 363-85. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-231-11274-2
34. La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence. "1898 and the History of a Queer Puerto Rican Century: Imperialism, Diaspora, and Social Transformation". *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 11. 1 (Fall 1999): 91–110. First published in *Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Identities*, ed. David William Foster, 197–215. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999. ISBN 0-8153-3228-9
35. Ring, Trudy. "Sylvia Rivera Gets a Place in the National Portrait Gallery" (http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/10/27/sylvia-rivera-gets-place-national-portrait-gallery) Advocate.com. Retrieved October 28, 2015.
36. Windy City Times. "1315 – Legacy Walk unveils 2 new plaques under rainbow sky – Gay Lesbian Bi Trans News Archive – Windy City Times" (http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Legacy-Walk-unveils-2-new-plaques-under-rainbow-sky-/56836.html) Windycitymediagroup.com Retrieved October 20, 2016.
37. Rivera, Sylvia, "Transvestites: Your Half Sisters and Half Brothers of the Revolution" in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* Untorelli Press, 2013. "Transvestites are homosexual men and women who dress in clothes of the opposite sex."
38. Rivera, Sylvia, "I'm Glad I Was in The Stonewall Riot" in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* Untorelli Press, 2013.

External links

- Randy Wicker Interviews Sylvia Rivera on the Pier on Vimeo September 21, 1995.
- "Gay Power!" on Vimeo – Sylvia Rivera speaks at Gay Liberation Rally, New York City, 1973
- MCCNY Charities – the Sylvia Rivera Food Pantry and Homeless Youth Services
- Stonewall Veterans Association
- Sylvia Rivera Law Project

Retrieved from 'https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sylvia_Rivera&oldid=887607357'

This page was last edited on 13 March 2019, at 18:22 (UTC).

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.